



Navigating the Information Landscape: What First-Year Students at Harvard Can Teach Us

Alison J. Head, Ph.D., S.T. Lee – Harvard Library Leadership & Innovation Lecture

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This year, 1,727 first-year students began their undergraduate education at Harvard College. What information-seeking practices will these incoming students discover, use, and adapt as they transition from high school to Harvard? What challenges will they face as they work on their first college-level research assignments? In this lecture, I will present the findings from our 2013 study of first-year students at Harvard College along with five other colleges and universities in the U.S. From in-depth interviews with these students during their first semester of college, we found a majority were excited about working on their first college-level research assignment, but many got lost in the thicket of information overload. Many found it difficult to effectively search academic library portals and find the library materials they needed. To a lesser extent, they also often struggled with reading and fully comprehending scholarly materials once they did find their sources. They also had difficulty determining the precise expectations of their professors for their course and research assignments. Taken together, our findings confirm what we have found in our recent studies: The Google-centric search skills that first-year students bring to college from high school can only get them so far when seeking out and using the trusted sources they need to have to fulfill their college research assignments successfully. These and other findings of Project Information Literacy have profound implications for teaching, learning, and working in the 21st century. Based on findings from our first-year student study, I present some recommendations for the librarians, faculty, fellows, and administrators who work with first-year students and to ensure that these students succeed in their learning endeavors.

About Alison

Alison Head is the Founder and Executive Director of the national study effort, Project Information Literacy (PIL). She is a Senior Researcher at the metaLAB (at) Harvard and a Visiting Research Scholar at Purdue University Libraries. Alison earned her Ph.D. in Information Science from U.C. Berkeley as well as her MLS and BA degrees from there. She has been a Research Fellow and a Faculty Associate at Harvard University's [Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society](#). Alison led the 2007 [Exploratory Information Literacy Study](#), a forerunner to PIL, at Saint Mary's College of California, where she taught as the Disney Visiting Professor in New Media for 10 years.

Since 2008, as part of our ongoing national study, PIL has surveyed and interviewed more than 13,000 students at 60 colleges and universities (including five studies with Harvard College students in the sample). PIL has investigated how college students find information and conduct research — their needs, strategies, and work-around's — to solve the information problems that occur during their course-related research and their everyday lives. Nine open-access [research reports](#) have been produced by PIL. In a 2016 *Inside Higher Education* [column](#), Barbara Fister called PIL "hands-down the most important long-term, multi-institutional research project ever launched on how students use information for school and beyond."

Links

- [About Project Information Literacy \(PIL\)](#)
- [Research report from PIL's first-year study](#)
- [Key findings video from PIL's first-year study](#)